

WHEN FAMILIARITY BREEDS CONTEMPT

Scriptures: Mark 6:1-6; Mark 4:13-20

If you have never read it, the best Christmas story of all time is *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* by Barbara Robinson. The narrator of the story is a girl in the church Sunday School whose mother directs the Sunday School Christmas pageant. The girl says,

The Herdmans were absolutely the worst kids in the history of the world. They lied and stole and smoked cigars (even the girls) and talked dirty and hit little kids and cursed their teachers and took the name of the Lord in vain and set fire to Fred Shoemaker's old broken down toolhouse. ... They were just so all around awful you could hardly believe they were real: Ralph, Imogene, Leroy, Claude, Ollie, and Gladys—six skinny, stringy-haired kids all alike except for being different sizes and having different black-and-blue places where they clonked each other (p. 1, 4).

But one day, by a strange series of events, the Herdmans ended up at church with all the main parts in the Sunday School Christmas pageant. Only they did not know the story. They were hearing it for the very first time. So the narrator's mother, the director of the pageant, read it to them, and here is their reaction:

I couldn't believe it. Among other things, the Herdmans were famous for never sitting still and never paying attention to anyone—teachers, parents (their own or anybody else's), the truant officer, the police—yet here they were, eyes glued on my mother and taking in every word. "What's that?" they would yell whenever they didn't understand the language, and when Mother read about there being no room at the inn, Imogene's jaw dropped and she sat up in her seat. "My God!" she said. "Not even for Jesus?" ...

"Well, now, after all," Mother explained, "nobody knew the baby was going to turn out to be Jesus." "You said Mary knew," Ralph said. "Why didn't she tell them?" "I would have told them!" Imogene put in. "Boy, would I have told them! What was the matter with Joseph that he didn't tell them? Her pregnant and everything," she grumbled.

"What was that they laid the baby in?" Leroy said. "That manger ... is that like a bed? Why would they have a bed in the barn?" "That's just the point," Mother said. "They *didn't* have a bed in the barn, so Mary and Joseph had to use whatever there was. What would you do if you had a new baby and no bed to put the baby in?" "We put Gladys in a bureau drawer," Imogene volunteered. "Well, there you are," Mother said, blinking a little. "You didn't have a bed for Gladys so you had to use something else." ...

"What were the wadded-up clothes?" Claude wanted to know. "The what?" Mother said. "You read about it—'she wrapped him in wadded-up clothes.'" "*Swaddling* clothes," Mother sighed. "Long ago, people used to wrap their babies very tightly in big pieces of material, so they couldn't move around. It made the babies feel cozy and comfortable." ... "You mean they tied him up and put him in a feedbox?" Imogene said. "Where was the Child Welfare?"

You get the idea. The Christmas story is really rather shocking when you hear it for the first time. God sent his Son into a world that had no place for him. He was tied up and put in a feedbox. King Herod even tried to kill him, an effort repeated 30 years later by Pontius Pilate. The Herdmans found the Christmas story offensive, because it is offensive. But most of us do not find the Christmas story offensive; we find it familiar.

That was the problem Jesus had in Nazareth, his home town. Let me show you some of the reactions Jesus provoked in the first six chapters of Mark's gospel. Take a pew Bible and turn to Mark 2:5. In Mark 2 a paralyzed man is brought to Jesus. Verse 5 says, "When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'" But look at the next two verses: "Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 'Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?'" The scribes were offended by Jesus because he claimed to forgive sins, something only God can do.

Now look at Mark, chapter 3. A man with a shriveled hand comes to church on the Sabbath day. The Pharisees watch to see if Jesus will break their laws against working on the Sabbath by healing the man. Verse 5 says, "He (Jesus) looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was restored." Verse 6 says, "The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him." The Pharisees and the followers of King Herod were offended by Jesus because he ignored their laws for the sake of helping people.

I was trying to think of a modern equivalent to this situation. Maybe it is like people who provide food or water or medical attention to illegal immigrants from Mexico. It is helping people, but some people view it as breaking the law and undermining government authority. That is how the Pharisees and Herodians felt about Jesus. His manner of helping people was breaking the law and undermining their authority. So they took offense at him.

One more example. Look at Mark, chapter 5. In Mark 5 Jesus encounters a demon possessed man. Today we might say he was mentally ill. But whether he is demon possessed or mentally ill does not matter, because the effect is the same. The man is isolated from everyone in the community. He lives in a graveyard bruising himself with stones. But Jesus welcomes him and heals him by sending his demons away into a herd of swine that are destroyed in the process. Now look at verses 16-17: "Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood." These people were offended by Jesus. Why? Because he put people ahead of economics. He was will to sacrifice the pigs for the sake of the person.

In the first five chapters of Mark's gospel there are many reasons why people are offended by Jesus. He claims to forgive people when he has no right to do so, and he helps people even when it means breaking the law or endangering profits. But now in chapter 6 Jesus comes to his home town of Nazareth. The home town folks acknowledge that Jesus is a great speaker and does spectacular miracles, but look at verse 3. They say, "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us? And they took offense at him."

In Nazareth people are offended by Jesus' familiarity. It is not his claim to forgive sins that bothers him. It is not his radical way of healing people even if it means breaking the law. It's the fact that they have known him since they were children. They were used to him. They had been around him so long, he could not possibly be special to them.

Could that be the problem we have with Jesus? There are a few people in our country who are offended by Jesus—people who resent having crosses on the badges of police chaplains or who resent having manger scenes on court house lawns. There are a few people who are offended by Jesus, but most people in our society are not offended by Jesus; they ignore him. They live day after day, year after year as if he is irrelevant. He is just part of the woodwork, a decoration to be brought out at certain holidays.

The tragedy is that Jesus cannot do anything in our lives if we treat him that way. Mark 6:5 says, "And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief." If you think Jesus is a fraud for claiming to be God, or if you are worried that he might impact your lifestyle or your sense of security, at least you are taking him seriously. Jesus can work with that. But if you simply ignore him, there is nothing he can do.

Today is Confirmation Sunday. There are students in this year's high school confirmation class that I have known since they were born. They have grown up around Jesus, just like the people of Nazareth. So to them I want to offer this final word: Don't do what the people of Nazareth did. Don't ignore Jesus just because he is familiar to you, because you have known him all your life. This person that you have heard about since you were young, this person whose birth you remember every year at Christmas—he can change your life if you let him, just like he has for centuries. If you follow him, if you pay attention to him, if you serve him even if sometimes you doubt him, he can give your life a purpose and hope that will last until you die and even after that. But he can't do anything if you ignore him.

- Ken Onstot
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